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ESSAY

Religious Studies: A Bibliographic Essay

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THE CLASSICS

The earliest scholarly studies of religion as a distinct subject occurred in and were shaped by the broader conditions of Western modernity—the philosophical legacies of the Enlightenment, the engagement of Western thinkers with religious otherness, and the sociopolitical contexts of the American and French revolutions. These intellectual, cultural, and political conditions challenged the established traditions of knowledge and social institutions, religion and religious authority in particular.

Although the dominant religious institutions in Western societies, and many of their respective theologians, rejected the earliest challenges of modernity philosophically and politically, a number of theologians entered a dialogue with it. They conversed with and responded to the

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philosophers of the Enlightenment, worked to reconcile the (theological) notions of permanence and truth with the (historical) notions of change, and came at the forefront of the use of historical and textual analysis in their study of religious traditions. It is important to note these earliest conversations of theology with the increasingly specialized humanities and social sciences, as the nature of the “proper” relationship between theology and religious studies has remained the subject of dispute among scholars of religion until today.

For the founders of sociological thought, a major—and sometimes *the* major—concern was the place of religion in the transformation of traditional societies into modern societies. Sociologists were interested in the role of religion in these changes as well as in the consequences of these changes for religion, seeing the latter on the losing side of the struggle between tradition and modernity. Indeed, it was the classics of sociology who articulated the mantra that shaped the conceptual and methodological framework for one whole century of scholarship on religion—the more a society will become modern, they declared, the less it will be religious.

The (discovery of the) psychological approach to religion established the individual and religious experience as the focal point of the study of religion, as opposed to religious institutions and rituals. The implicit element of this new focus of analysis for many representatives of the psychological approach to religion was a critique of the institutional form of religiosity and religious authority. Some saw religion as the universal neurosis of humanity; others established the idea of the (moral) usefulness that religiosity as spirituality can have in the individual’s life.

The phenomenologists’ concerns centered around the nature of the religious experience and the possibility of defining religion universally and as a very distinctive set of phenomena. Some phenomenologists separated the moral and ethical contents of what we know as religion, arguing that the idea of the holy is something that cannot be fully comprehended; others defined what religion is and is not by juxtaposing two Durkheimian categories—sacred and profane.

One could argue that religious studies started becoming a distinctive field of study at the moment when Western scholars began *examining* and *comparing* the relationships between different systems of beliefs, on the one hand, and their respective texts, cultures, and social and historical contexts, on the other hand. Or, as some contemporary scholars of religion point out, religious studies had its beginning in the moment when religion was defined as a subject of study by being separated from the totality of social life.

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THE CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

Anthropologists of religion after World War II were interested in the rituals and myths of traditional societies and the ways in which they related to life and death, and everyday life of these societies. They resuscitated the study of other people's religions from the colonial view of "primitive" peoples and their "magical mentality" (by those such as Frazer). At the same time, the dominance of the functionalist and structuralist approaches implied an attempt to unpack the universal elements of human religious (and cultural) experience. For some anthropologists, the universal patterns of human experience were hidden in "the logical structures" that underline

the variety of mythical expressions (which then embrace all specific historical developments); for others, that was the ethnographic quest and theorization about the ways in which societies incorporate and frame their *liminal* experiences and the experience of freedom by ritualizing and building them in the symbols and institutions that enable the functioning of social life.

Some dissonant voices in the postwar anthropology of religion argued that anthropological study is not a scientific endeavor and that its main work is the work of translation. Nevertheless, these studies were characterized by the strive to articulate the generalizable patterns in the role of religion in societies, particularly in the centrality of religion—rituals and myths—in transforming and maintaining the social order.

Anthropologists shared this striving for universality of categories and questions with the postwar sociologists of religion. The main difference was their focus: for anthropologists, this was the traditional, and for sociologists, the modern societies. Consequently, whereas anthropologists were locating the matrix and dynamic in the role of religions in traditional societies, sociologists were identifying the declining authority of religion and the problematic relationship between freedom, the questions of meaning, community, and social order. Theologians often translated such concerns into questions about the ways in which religion can (and does) reestablish itself as central for the individual and social life, while keeping the sense of its moral calling in modernity.

Although the study of religion after the 1960s carried a recognition of the limitations of the grand theories in dealing with social realities, it may be argued that in the “contemporary classical” period of religious studies the grand narratives and the universal understanding of analytic categories are very much intact.

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RELIGIOUS STUDIES AS WE KNOW IT

The questions raised in the last thirty years of scholarship in religious studies have prompted a critique of the grand narratives and universal understanding of analytic categories that characterized modern thought. Scholars are attempting to reconcile the ideals of modernism with the critiques of post-modernism by weighing the universality of experience against a concern with particularity. Examples of these areas of concern include feminist and post-colonial critiques and a reflection on the methodology of the study of religion.

Methodology of the Study of Religion

What is religion? Can we define it at all and, if we can, why do we define it in a particular way? Is religion really nothing but a “term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes” (Smith 1998: 281)? Can we separate it from culture?

What is the relationship between religion and collective identity? What is the relationship between normativity and objectivity in religious studies? Does theology belong in religious studies? Does the rise of religiosity across the globe—which counters the expectations of most major classics in religious studies—demand a critical assessment not only of the conceptual apparatus of our field but also of the whole social imaginary of enlightenment upon which the field is instituted? What can we learn from our predecessors, from a more charitable rather than just a critical reading of their work?

The present phase in the studies of religion is marked by many questions. It is marked by the authors who write in religious studies about religious studies, reflecting in different ways on the questions of the purpose and the methodology of their field. For some, this most recent development in religious studies is a sign of the maturity of the field. For others, this is a sign of its crisis.

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Gender and The Study of Religion

Although pioneers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton had long urged a feminist approach to religion, the first wave of feminist scholarship within religious studies included those who began critiquing sacred texts using the hermeneutics of suspicion such as Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible. Those involved in the first wave of feminist scholarship sought to expose the androcentrism of Judeo-Christian traditions and pointed to the use of women's experiences as a legitimate hermeneutical tool which might be offered as a corrective to the disembodied scholar of traditional scholarship. Has the study of religion taken place from an unexamined male scholar's perspective? Are feminist models of divinity included within the normative religious traditions? Is there a relationship between the analytic structures of the dominant intellectual discourse and the attitudes and structures of violence within that culture? In what ways can the scholar be reconceived as embodied and situated within history?

A second wave of feminist critique emerged in the 1980's in the form of womanist theology, which largely addressed the concerns of African-American women. It challenged the first wave feminist movement, suggesting that it was dominated by the concerns of White middle-class women. Womanism attempted to broaden its critiques to address the matrix of oppression of Black women and lesbians.

Most recently, gender concerns have given rise to the area of queer theory, and in dialogue with the postcolonial critique of religious studies, gender theory works to examine the connection between intellectual discourse and violence and oppression.

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Postcolonialism

In his critical work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said offers a critique of European colonial representations of religion and introduces a concern with “strategic location” as a corrective to the unexamined position of the Western scholar. Recent postcolonial scholarship has focused on the need to describe religion in indigenous terms in order to recover the subjectivity of the formerly objectified colonial “other.” Two analytical concepts central to this effort are that of indigeneity and hybridity. These concern themselves with place and self-determination versus displacement and migration, respectively. Postcolonialism continues to interact with analytical trends in gender theory and postmodernism.

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MOVING FORWARD

The questions that are shaping and will continue to shape the contemporary study of religion are simultaneously formed by the global concerns and global perspective in the study of religion and by the perspectival character of individual scholarly work. In attempting to respond to challenges from both modernism and postmodernism, scholars of religion are trying to be self-reflective—to know and acknowledge where they stand, where they come from, and what is shaping their scholarship—but also to offer a portrayal—description and analysis—that is faithful to the subjects of their studies. Scholars are approving the need for the “detraditionalization” of religious studies, but they do not want its dehistoricization (Braude 2004: 278). They are aware of the ways in which their own ontologies shape their study of religion, but they are also concerned with the manner in which their study of religion is shaping religions themselves.

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The difficulties of, and the need for, the (philosophically) self-reflective, (historically) informed, (sociologically) interpretative, and analytically generalizable approach to religion are evident in many subfields of the study of religion. We concentrate here on comparative religious ethics,

studies of religion and dialogue, studies of secularization and secularism, evolutionary-psychological and cognitivist approaches to religion, and economic and rational choice theories of religion.

Comparative Religious Ethics

The work in comparative religious ethics raises some of the most burning questions of the global world of late modernity—questions about the relationship of religion, pluralism, freedom, authority, democracy, and civic responsibility. It also raises the question of comparison in complicated and powerful ways.

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Global Religious Communities: Difference, Conflict, and Dialogue

The subfield that addresses the role of religion in (social) conflicts and violence is intertwined with the philosophical and practical concerns of interreligious dialogue, and, as such, it demonstrates the direct implications that religious studies may have for the world in which we live. Most of these works attempt to understand the critical relationship between universal and particular in religions and the consequences of that relationship for both conflict and dialogue.

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Secularization and Secularism

The contemporary debates about the validity and possibilities of the classical secularization theory have several layers: first, they reveal the need for a critical reading of the categories used in the study of religion from its beginnings, while keeping what is analytically useful and empirically accurate in them; second, they expose the normative assumptions of the Enlightenment's social imaginaries, secularism in particular, that is built into the contemporary studies of religions; and third, they point out the importance of the general theories in the study of religions, while keeping the sense of historical and sociological particularities of what is studied.

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Economic and Rational Choice Theories of Religion

The advocates of the economic and rational choice approaches to religion suggest not only that the logic of the free market can be employed to understand some religious phenomena, but that economic insights can explain all of them. Thus, when applied in the realm of religious life, the principles of supply and demand answer why religion is alive in the religiously heterogenous United States and not in other Western societies. Even the motivation of the early Christian martyrs, it is argued, can be understood as the rational choice of the actors rather than as religiously shaped act.

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Evolutionary-Psychological and Cognitivist Theories of Religion

Combining the developments in cognitive and psychological sciences with anthropology, evolutionary-psychological and cognitivist theories of religion attempt to explain the transmission, maintenance, and transformation of religions, *and* the longevity and adaptability of religion as a cultural phenomenon. The proponents of these theories thus focus on the individuals' cognition and its evolution to understand culture. At the same time, they depart from the dominant anthropological emphasis on the diversity and cultural specificity of religious experiences.

The theoretical push of the evolutionary-psychological and cognitivist theories toward what is universal in religious experiences is not a nostalgic return to the grand theoretical endeavors of classical anthropology. The

universality here is not assumed, but it is rather located. As representatives of these theories clarify, it is not religion as such but religious ideas that are the object of theory; it is not some transcendental (or transcendent) truth but the cognitive evolution that shapes the universal modes of religious life.

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